



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Getting streets ahead on city planning

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Image: 1748 map of Alexandria. Library of Congress.

When the street system for Alexandria was first laid in 1748, several options were available, the most obvious being that thoroughfares would respect geological features such as ponds, streams and hills and meander alongside their edges. This was the system largely used in most American cities of the 18th century, including New York, which at the time was still concentrated on the lower portion of Manhattan Island.

But Alexandria chose a different path for its development, one that put a priority on efficient use of land to promote commerce and the movement of goods between western markets and the city port. Not an inch of land was to be wasted, with streams buried, hills leveled and even vast areas of the waterfront to be filled over time. Virtually no land was set aside for parks or open spaces other than the public market at what is now Market Square, which was established within two years.

As documented in this 1748 plat of the proposed town, prepared by the 17-year-old surveyor George Washington, the plan for Alexandria would begin with a series of 84 rectangular shaped blocks surrounded by a grid of streets at right angles to one another. When the four plots on each block were auctioned on July 14, 1748, the town extended from Water Street — now Lee Street — to Royal Street and from Duke Street to Oronoco Street.

Clearly, it was expected that Alexandria would grow in the years that followed, as the streets that terminated at the wooded edges of the new town were to be extended as development progressed. Even underwater lands, such as the swampy Ralph's Gut on the right side, were auctioned off with the expectation that they would be filled within the first few years. Unfortunately, that task often took decades to correct and delayed northward development for some time.

Like most colonial towns of the period, when Alexandria was laid out it was expected that some token honor of respect to the crown was warranted. Town founders chose to honor the titles of English royalty by naming major east-west streets for male and female members of the aristocracy in descending order of the main street, which was planned as Cameron Street. That street was named in honor of





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Thomas, the sixth Lord Fairfax of Cameron who had returned to Virginia in 1747 and settled at the estate "Belvoir."

Thus King, Prince and Duke were selected to be the south side street names and Queen and Princess selected for the north side. There has been speculation that Oronoco Street was to have been called Duchess Street, but Washington's early plat records it clearly as "Oronoko" Street. This decision may have been influenced by the location of the tobacco inspection station nearby. South America's Orinoco River though Venezuela and Columbia was famous for its tobacco regions and the highly navigable river was penetrable for well over 1,000 miles.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.